



Read All About It: Galveston Newspaper Never Misses a Beat

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Galveston County, Texas

Galveston, TX - The Galveston County Daily News has written countless stories about the challenges and heroes of Hurricane Ike (2008). But there is one story they have refused to write: Their own. During the worst of Ike, they didn't miss an edition.



When the eye of the hurricane passed over the newspaper building at 2 AM on September 13, workers who were there overnight rushed out and boarded up cracked windows in preparation for the second half of the storm. The worst was yet to come: The second half of the storm brought 110-mph winds, rain coming in and around the windows, and a 12-foot surge that flooded the carpet. They lost their roof covering, power, generator, satellite phones, and nearly all their technology.

"We were working around the clock," editor Heber Taylor said. "Our reporters were operating out of emergency management centers in Galveston and League City." Dedicated to their readers and their craft, reporters filed stories using whatever technology they could muster, including cell phones, laptops, and wireless air cards. The News would then export copy editing to the mainland and printed through sister newspapers, starting with the Herald Zeitung in New Braunfels, Texas.

Leigh Jones, one of the News reporters, had to resort to text messaging the news from her cell phone when most communications channels were down. She sent short, 140-character (not words, characters) bulletins, called "tweets," through Twitter, a social networking Web site that works over multiple networks and devices:

5:44 p.m. Sept.12 – People are calling for help now but no one can get to them. The water is really coming up fast now. ...

7:55 a.m. Sept.13 – Crews pulling people from high water. ...

8:30 a.m. Sept.13 – Entire row of houses on fire. Nothing crews can do. ...

8:42 a.m. Sept.13 – Structures from the beach are now on the street. ...

In another city, a reporter who had traveled with evacuees to cover their story was able to get to the Twitter site and convert the bulletins for The News to post online in real time. Soon other media discovered the bulletins and used the Twitter text for regional and national coverage.

When the newspaper was ready for delivery, finding readers proved nearly impossible. Delivery personnel went where they thought people might be, dropping bundles at emergency centers and hotels. "People would see our trucks and flag them down," Taylor said, "and I don't know how many people told me they hiked to the points of delivery just to find out what was happening. Think about it: There was no cable, no CNN, no local news stations. This was the way they got information, and information is critical.

"Some people picking up the paper were astonished to find out that the city had a curfew. People in the emergency command center and people in other states knew there was a curfew, but the people living on the island had no way of knowing other than picking up the newspaper."

The News turned to the Web, posting stories as soon as they were written, before assembling them for print. Through the Web, the newspaper was able to reach evacuees, extended families and news media.

"Our readership on the Web was enormous and continues to be very high," Taylor said. In some cases, faraway Web users relayed information back to survivors in the impacted area. "It was amazing to me how people in New York would see something on our Web site and pass it along to somebody in Biloxi or New Orleans who somehow, maybe after 20 tries, would get a call in to Galveston, telling people there was a curfew, and those people would go tell their neighbors," Taylor said.

"It was critically important to get out accurate information," the editor continued. "There were all kinds of horribly inaccurate rumors cropping up. There was a pernicious rumor that Ball High School burned to the ground, and it would not die away.

When the phones did work, I got angry calls from people accusing us of hiding the truth. Of course, one of the things you can do is report what is there, as well as what didn't happen. There is tremendous value in that."

Perhaps it is not surprising that it would take more than Hurricane Ike to stop this paper and its 20-member news staff. The oldest newspaper in Texas, The News has been continually publishing since 1842, through epidemics, wildfires, the Civil War, and major hurricanes in 1900, 1915, 1963, and 1983. The current building received some damage while it was under construction during Hurricane Carla in 1963, leading to the decision to make it strong enough to withstand hurricanes.

Today, building superintendent Brett Baker calls the structure "one of the safest buildings in Galveston." The News plant is a hulking concrete fort with a 14-inch-thick concrete floor, 9-inch-thick concrete walls, and a concrete roof. The windows are rated for up to 160-mph winds and further protected with internal film. The building is behind the seawall, elevated, and anchored on 30-foot-deep concrete piers.

What advice does the newspaper staff give to others on curbing storm losses?

Baker recommends investing in a strong, elevated building and protecting the integrity of the windows and other openings. "These newer buildings are being built too cheaply," he said. "Corrugated steel. They can't handle this wind. They rip apart." He hopes to look into shutters or coverings for the windows and wants to have them resealed to prevent leaks.

"Have a written plan," Taylor said, "Review it every year before the season. Also, I would have an annual review of technology. I would decide what you can use and what you can afford and if you live on the Gulf Coast, I would seriously be asking what you can't afford not to have. The solutions that actually worked for us are not that expensive: air cards and cell phones."

Taylor recommends redundant systems. "I would tell other editors this: One of the most important provisions you can build in to any plan is the provision for failure. Think about what you will do if something fails, even something you think is going to be 100 percent reliable. You have to be very flexible as things develop."

The lessons learned from Hurricane Ike have changed the way the paper does business, Taylor said. The newspaper now relies more on cell phones, air cards, and the Web. "We're using the Web much more," Taylor said. "We're still operating as we did during the emergency posting information as we get it. We're posting these stories in real time on our Web site, then at the end of the day we pull together a print edition."

Taylor also said hazard mitigation, disaster preparation, and emergency planning will play a larger role in future news operations.

"The reward is that we were here when people needed us," Taylor said. "If we hadn't been in a strong, elevated building, if we hadn't had that written plan, we simply would have failed when people most needed us. We'll plan better for the next time, but we did have that plan, and it allowed us to keep functioning, even when things went wrong."

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region VI**

State: **Texas**

County: **Galveston County**

City/Community: **Galveston**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**
Hazard Type: **Hurricane/Tropical Storm**
Activity/Project Type: **Education/Outreach/Public Awareness**
Activity/Project Start Date: **09/2008**
Activity/Project End Date: **09/2008**
Funding Source: **Private funds**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **No**
Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**
Tested By Federal Disaster #: **1791 , 09/13/2008**
Repetitive Loss Property? **No**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: **<http://galvnews.com>**

Main Points

- Several survival systems used by The Galveston County Daily News are integral to continuity of operations plans, which could be useful for any business:
- Identify your risks and take aggressive hazard mitigation actions to make your building and site safe. Secure your roof, windows, and doors. If you're in an area at high risk of flooding, elevate or floodproof, if at all possible.
- At a minimum, plan to elevate or move what's most important, possibly including evacuation of personnel.
- Identify the things that must be done for your business to continue. Plan where and how you will continue, even if you have to leave your present site.
- Identify your communications needs and the best ways to meet them.
- Be redundant. Back up records. Plan for the potential failure of essential elements of your system and alternate ways to operate if your power fails, your computers crash, your suppliers abandon you or your customers disappear.



Its sturdy, elevated plant behind the seawall protected the newspaper during Hurricane Ike.